

Settler Sexuality

**Resistance to State-Sanctioned Violence, Reclamation of Anti-Colonial
Knowledges & Liberation for All**

K'é Infoshop Collective

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"Indigenous feminisms transcend the general fight for rights and recognition within a nation-state — indigenous feminisms speak to the responsibilities we have to one another and to our relationship to the physical and non-physical world."

Key Terms and Definitions

- **settler-colonialism** — the ongoing process of non-Native settlers occupying Native land, demanding their world views, morals, and economies be followed, while attempting to erase and assimilate the original inhabitants
- **heteropatriarchy** — the societal structure in which heterosexual men possess the most amount of control and power compared to womxn and queer people, who are disempowered by the system
- **imperialism** — policy, action, and ongoing process of extending power over foreign land and people often with the violent intent to control their affairs
- **capitalism** — an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state/by the people, exchange relies on currency, overall system relies on individualistic thought and competition
- **subjectivity** — ideas, perspectives, feelings, experiences, and desires of an individual/collective expressed with agency and consciousness
- **queer** — unspecific non-heterosexual identity/subjectivity, cannot fully describe Indigenous perspectives of gender/sexuality
- **Two-Spirit** — contemporary pan-Indigenous term for non-binary/queer individuals, unspecific.
- **globalization** — the process of international interaction and integration between people, goods, technology, governments, and economies
- **neoliberalism** — hyper-capitalism; deregulation of the market, free-market capitalism alongside liberal agendas to erase race and homogenize queerness
- **decolonization** — the action and practice of dismantling harmful structures of power, reclaiming previous subjectivities, and envisioning a future built on previous and current understandings of compassion, relation, and accountability
- **Indigenous feminisms** — intersectional theory and practice of decolonial feminism, directly challenges settler-colonialism, capitalism, and western conceptions of "gender" and "sexuality."

The policing of indigenous genders and sexualities as a means to further the larger settler-colonial project led to the development of a “settler sexuality.” Scott Morgensen (settler scholar) defines settler sexuality as “a white national heteronormativity that regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of settler subjects.” In non-academic speak, settler sexuality can be described as an “exceptional” form of sexual expression enforced by the settler-state. The settler-state deems heterosexual monogamy as “exceptional” and “normal,” and anything beyond those confines as “primitive” and “unexceptional.”

Beginning with the early violence inflicted upon indigenous people in North America and the origins of settler sexuality, the zine goes on to describe how such regimes were used to further the larger settler-colonial project to pillage Native land and eradicate Native populations. Indigenous feminisms are then presented in order to illuminate paths toward decolonization. Radically different from mainstream conceptions of feminism, the zine highlights the need for Indigenous feminisms in the larger aims to eliminate structures of power harmful to indigenous existence, such as heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy. Indigenous feminisms act as a way to challenge settler sexuality and settler colonialism on the whole.

The language used throughout, such as “gender” and “sexuality,” do not and cannot fully describe and communicate the ways in which our ancestors understood them. Western interpretations of gender and sexuality have, from the time they have been articulated and policed, been used to define each other. For instance, “homosexuality” focuses on the “act” of “same-sex” relations. Indigenous gender and sexuality extend beyond such definitions. Gender encapsulates the mental, emotional, and social experience and expression of an individual; Gender has never been about the biological or physical.

“Queer” is also used minimally throughout the zine to loosely refer to sexual subjectivities generally not accepted or embraced by settler-colonial heteropatriarchy. The broadness of the term can be violent, but the English language can’t really describe something so complicated and abstract. Most recently, the pan-tribal term “Two-Spirit,” a translated Anishinaabe word, has been used to reclaim Indigenous trans subjectivities. However, there is pushback both within and beyond academia due to the broadness, the perpetuation of the gender binary and colonial understandings of gender. “Queerness” as we understand it today differs largely from the way our ancestors understood gender and sexuality. The term “indigenous,” as used in this zine refers to the native inhabitants of so-called North America.

So much more could also be added to this final product, this only does a fraction of the work grassroots organizers throughout the world manage.

Settler Sexuality on Stolen Land

Capitalism, Imperialism, and Race

Indigenous womxn, “queer,” transgender, and non-binary people endure unspeakable violence at the hands of non-native settlers and even their own community members, however they continue to resist and pave a path toward brighter tomorrows. Indigenous womxn, trans folk, queers stand at the forefront of the larger decolonial movement to reclaim previous subjectivities and to build bright collective futures. Decolonization is often mistaken as an effort to “go back” to precolonial ways, but the active process of such carries much more gravity than that. Indigenous people not only demand the total repatriation of land, but we continually envision and push for

a world void of structures such as settler-colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, racism, fascism, and heteropatriarchy. Decolonization involves reclaiming previous ways of living — horizontal leadership, collectivism, and recognition of universal relations — and pushing such lifeways into practice and action in order to develop a sustainable future. It's not all about the past, it's about what we want for our communities in the years to come. Indigenous womxn and queers lead the larger movement for such futures despite the violence they experience under settler-colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.

Proto-capitalist logic originated from the philosophical shift from naturalistic thinking to humanistic thinking among the Greek. Philosophers began to explore the complicated questions of “human nature” and placed the individual at the center of everything. Individualistic thinking characterizes the broader Enlightenment tradition that followed in the footsteps of Greek philosophy and later came to influence western ideas of political theory today. Centralization of the individual and the neglect of the collective eventually trickled down to the shift from feudalism to the racialized capitalism that unfolded at the advent of settler-colonialism and imperialism.

Desperation for profit and wealth spearheaded the onslaught of violent imperialism abroad. Empire building relied on the blood and sweat of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. Colonizers had to conjure up some “reason” for their insatiable greed, dependence on slave labor, and for the genocide of indigenous populations. Colonizers constructed race as we know it today in order to “have a reason” for their inhumanity, and they placed whiteness at the top of the hierarchy and dark skin at the bottom. This caste of violent racism persists in our everyday life today.

Settler-colonialism has always been about the theft, disrespect, and capitalization of land. Whereas Indigenous people always saw themselves in relation to the land and to each other, colonizers viewed land as something that could be “developed” and Indians stood in the way of that “vision.” Indians needed to be assimilated/eliminated because they stood between white settlers and the land.

Indigenous Understandings vs. Settler Sexuality

Prior to colonization, womxn/queer/trans/non-binary folks horizontally led many Indigenous societies based on their inherent sense of compassion, conflict-resolution, critical thinking and problem-solving. Matrilineal Indigenous societies honored womxn, queer, and trans/non-binary folks as leaders, intellectuals, caregivers, homemakers, and warriors.

Indigenous conceptions of “gender” considered the mental, emotional, and social aspects of one's expression and identity rather than an individual's physical or biological makeup. People who would be considered “trans” today do not align with colonial understandings of “gender.” However, it goes without saying, trans/non-binary people have existed since time immemorial. Indigenous people, all throughout North America, have their own creation stories that acknowledge and celebrate trans/non-binary community members. Most recently, the pan-tribal term “Two-Spirit,” a translated Anishinaabe word, has been used to reclaim Indigenous trans subjectivities. However, there is pushback both within and beyond academia to the broadness and the perpetuation of the gender binary and colonial understandings of gender. Tribal communities throughout the continent have their own unique understandings and cosmologies that embrace and celebrate such subjectivities. The Winkte of the Lakota, the Mahu of the Kanaka Maoli, the Ihamana of the Zuni and the Nádleeh of the Diné have largely been erased and misinterpreted as our overall understanding and approach to gender have been perverted by colonial interpretations.

The idea of universal relations persists throughout many Indigenous lifeways. Everyone is connected to everything and everyone; we are all in relation. Therefore, love was expressed without ownership of another person's body; some societies practiced non-monogamous companionship and approached intimate relations collectively rather than individually. Emphasizing the importance of maintaining universal relations ensured a strong collective of informed individuals.

Settler constructions and articulations of "gender" and "sexuality" have generated years of violence. Western conceptions relate gender and sexuality to the other and base such subjectivities upon "the act" of physically engaging with someone of a certain "gender." For instance, "homosexuality" focuses on the "act" of "same-sex" relations, with "same-sex" defined by colonial understandings of gender. Sex was something that was "confessed." The heavy articulation and simultaneous repression of sex and sexuality centered the individual, rather than the collective and only made it become something that continues to be a staple part of one's identity and expression. White settler societies generally followed a strict Judeo-Christian gender binary and hierarchy, wherein men employed higher authority over women in every aspect of society, especially within their "normal" and "respectable" heterosexual monogamous relationships.

Western civilization's perspectives of such intimacies empower heterosexual white men and situates them as "the norm." Indigenous gender and sexuality was considered primitive and pagan, unhinged and unacceptable to settlers. Settlers used such "savage Indian" rhetoric to depict Native people as mere obstacles in the larger capitalist, land-grab scheme.

According to historical accounts of early Spanish settlement, queer and trans people were among the first to be brutalized as settlers elevated "settler sexuality" as the expectation for life. Missionaries massacred queer and trans folks for their "unnatural ways of life" and forced everyone else to adhere to colonial understandings of gender and sexuality.

As womxn often held leadership positions within communities, something unfamiliar and uncivilized to settlers, they were among the first targets of initial violence as well. In order to fully destroy matriarchies, it was not uncommon for white settlers to enslave Native womxn as sex slaves. These atrocities were executed with the intention to control and dominate Indigenous people in the same way settlers intended to pillage the land.

Settler sexuality can be contextualized in a myriad of ways depending on a given point in Native history. Christian missionaries forced Christianity upon Native communities along with the conceptions of gender and sexuality within it. The Native man was and still is depicted as a sexual deviant that white women must be protected from. He is brute and savage, unhinged. On the other hand, the Native woman was and still is degraded to a submissive sex object. She is quiet and still, easy to use. Any other person beyond that male-female binary was/is unacceptable and was/is treated as such.

Settler Sexuality in Motion

Settler encroachment brutalized and erased matriarchy and trans/non-binary/queer identities as a means to eradicate Indigenous livelihood from the continent. Native land dispossession manifested in rape, murder, and eventually slow-burn genocide disguised as "humane" assimilationist efforts. The so-called U.S. government decided to tone down their more explicitly violent tactics and instead pursue a slower genocide through biopolitical surveillance and assimilation projects. White anthropologists, in efforts to preserve some "authentic" image of the remnants of Native people, also began studying Native people and cultures. French settlers coined the term

“berdashe,” translated to “passive homosexual” or “male prostitute,” to refer to people of genders they did not understand. “Berdashe” eventually trickled down to anthropological terminology where it remains in the larger practice of fossilizing Indigenous life and knowledge. The field of anthropology, and the broader academic landscape, has been a site of violence against Native bodies as it works to examine complicated and abstract Native epistemologies through a colonial framework of thinking. Such frameworks of thinking paint Indigenous people as relics of the past, antithetical to modernity. Anthropology and academia produced harmful misrepresentations that continue to fuel the settler fascination for Indigenous peoples. As Native identity was forcefully confined to the past, colonial governments began to institutionally erase, disenfranchise, and police Indigenous existence.

Settler sexuality was violently and institutionally imposed upon indigenous lives through a gender binary, designated gender roles, state-sanctioned marriage, the “nuclear family,” and gendered spaces, such as boarding schools, in a larger attempt to culturally eliminate Indigenous people. Boarding schools segregated young children based on the western gender binary and enforced it through the curriculum and teachers. Some boarding schools were run by missions, and some weren’t, but all of them forced Christian conceptions of “exceptional” gender and sexuality upon the students. Boarding schools generally excluded Native students from academia and pushed them toward vocations like nursing and carpentry so that they could “successfully” assimilate into mainstream society. Young womxn were pushed toward the likes of domestic and reproductive labor — traditionally feminine positions. Meanwhile, young men were pushed toward more “masculine” professions. Throughout their years at boarding school, students were forced to internalize subliminal and more explicit messages of westernized ideas of exceptional citizenship. This all served to “kill the Indian and save the man.” Land allotment laws in both the U.S. and Canada required womxn to be in hetero-monogamous marriages to access land. Such laws and the overall institution of marriage reduced womxn and children to property of men. Prior to colonization, womxn/queer/trans folks inherited land. Men were often expected to move in with their partners as well. However, western institutions of marriage have made people become property. More people began to follow this formula for companionship as missionaries converted more people and as more children passed through the boarding school system. Patriarchal ideals infiltrated the domestic sphere of Indigenous existence.

Modern Settler Sexuality: The Real Impacts

Due to such heavy coercion to conform to heteronormative citizenship within the nation-state, disempowered Native womxn and queer people were confronted with violent misogynies, homophobia, and transphobia. Boarding schools, their violent administrators, and the furthered entrenchment of white supremacist heteropatriarchy throughout the continent traumatized children and their communities. Settler-colonialism and a rapidly changing capitalist nation-state alienated Native people from their previous, anti-colonial subjectivities. Indigenous communities internalized and exuded the very capitalist and heteropatriarchal mindsets the previous generations aimed to resist. Indigenous womxn, queers, and trans/non-binary people continued to face relentless violence and were confined to subservient political positions as Native men reaped the benefits of male privilege and began to dominate tribal government positions.

Missionaries stayed on reservations to convert Natives to Christianity. Christian disdains for queer people seeped into Indigenous life and perspective. Heteropatriarchy alienated queer and

trans/non-binary Natives from their communities as they began to experience violence and exclusion. Native queers endure homophobia and violence from their communities. Today, Native queer and trans/non-binary youth have some of the highest rates of suicide. Native communities actively reject their queer/trans/non-binary relatives through constant erasure and violence. In addition to that alienation, the mainstream and predominantly white LGBTQ community relentlessly fetishizes and appropriates Native queerness/trans/non-binary subjectivities. Native trans/non-binary individuals are forced to live with incredibly high rates of violence as they endure equally high rates of poverty and isolation. Heteropatriarchy and capitalism obstructs them from peaceful existence.

Violence against Native womxn and queer people persists throughout the so-called U.S. and Canada today. Domestic and sexual violence rates within Native communities exceed the overall national averages. Numerous indigenous womxn go missing every year and just as many are murdered with no rhyme or reason. The movement and hashtag Missing and Murdered Indigenous Womxn (MMIW) originated in Canada in response to trafficked Native womxn in “man camps,” camping sites for extractive industry workers and intense hubs for sex trafficking where Native womxn are often targeted. In Canada, Indigenous womxn make up a large part of the prison population despite being a generally small percentage of the overall population. In the U.S., police murder Native people at the highest rate per capita among any other ethnic group, and Native womxn account for a large percent of the murders.

Once matriarchal societies are now male-dominated tribal councils motivated by profit, even when it's at the expense of the wellbeing of the land and water. Heteropatriarchy and capitalism dictate the finer functions of government and politics; the system was made to disempower womxn, queer relatives, the land, and the water.

For many Indigenous womxn, queers, and trans/non-binary people, it's not a matter of *if*, but a matter of *when*.

Indigenous Feminisms and the Path to Decolonization

Liberation from the binds of settler-colonialism calls for the reclamation of previous subjectivities, such as indigenous feminisms, and the complete annihilation of capitalism and heteropatriarchy wherever it pervades existing governments and affairs. The current systems in place cannot and will not save us. The cops have proven time and time again they are agents of a state that actively hates and dehumanizes poor Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities — they will never be on our side. Legislation and policies can only go so far when the entire system was built to criminalize us and to protect the white and wealthy.

Indigenous feminisms transcend the general fight for rights and recognition within a nation-state — indigenous feminisms speak to the responsibilities we have to one another and to our relationship to the physical and non-physical world. Indigenous feminisms can be applied to nearly every aspect of our lives as it entails our relationship to the universe, and that means maintaining strong relations with womxn, queers, and trans/non-binary people. Indigenous feminisms includes and fights for our trans/non-binary relatives especially as they are often erased and excluded by people who claim to be Indigenous feminists. Indigenous communities have employed such rich philosophies to their lives before contact, and the values can guide us forward.

The elimination of concepts and practices such as property and ownership can reconnect people to one another. Human beings are naturally social beings, and we have depended on one

another to survive since time immemorial. Our cosmologies recognize the universal interconnectedness everything and everyone share. One can never be alone as we are all part of the same life and we have a responsibility to take care of one another. This directly counters later developments of capitalist logic wherein individuals must go through life alone and compete with another to achieve security in an ever-precarious market.

Now, in an internationally connected world, the market has expanded to global heights in a phenomena referred to as globalization. As everything becomes a commodity under capitalism and as the public sphere becomes private, even our bodies and identities merge with the market. Transnational Indigenous alliances are now possible and can be fostered through the praxis of Indigenous feminisms. Organizing urban and reservation communities present a number of challenges, however indigenous feminist praxis calls for us to recognize revolution is not a singular ordeal, but rather a community effort. Indigenous feminisms push us to remember our responsibility to each other, and it demands our compassion, attention, and labor. Indigenous feminisms requires us to constantly challenge power and to hold each other and ourselves accountable for the good of the community.

Decolonization requires us to imagine the future we want for ourselves. Marginalized people around the globe demand a world without hegemonic heteropatriarchy, racism, and capitalism. We demand a world without an oppressive class system that predicates its power upon the exploitation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people and the larger working class.

Dismantling the existing system and healing the problems through indigenous feminisms can motivate and uplift us in the darkest of moments. Organized people power has already reclaimed so much, and it can do so much more.

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